DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 386 734 CS 215 032

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TITLE Writing as a Response to Reading. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-CS-95-08
PUB DATE 95
CONTRACT RR93002011
NOTE 3p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Indiana University, 2805 E. 10th St., Suite 150, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; *Journal Writing; Reader Response; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Writing Relationship; Writing Assignments; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; *Reading Logs; *Response to Literature; Writing Thinking Relationship

ABSTRACT

Although reading and writing exist only in relation to each other, writing plays little or no role in the usual instructional approaches to reading. Mostly, reading is taught as a sequence of discrete skills, which is ineffective since it accommodates the analytic reading style to the exclusion of global, kinesthetic, and auditory styles. Reading taught together with writing can accommodate all reading styles. By writing while reading, students could learn to organize their thoughts, and after habitually writing in response to reading, they could learn to clarify and refine their thoughts. Through activities centered around a reading log, the students could elucidate several aspects of their thought processes: using the reading log as a "response journal," they could discover ideas, and using it as a "text-to-meaning journal," they could rethink ideas, and using it as a "process journal," they could regulate their reading habits. Before students make entries in their reading logs, the teacher must ensure that they know how to use the log. Before every assignment, the teacher could discuss the type of reading and the purpose for reading, as well as the procedures for the particular assignment. All the activities arranged before, during, and after a reading and all the specific writing assignments made along with the reading are based upon the premise that students assimilate their perceptions of a text most fully by writing in response to reading. (Contains nine references.) (RS)

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ERIC Digest

Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication EDO-CS-95-08

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Writing as a Response to Reading

by Gary R. Cobine

ED 386 734

Reading and writing exist only in relation to each other. Writing is to reading as waking is to sleeping, as giving is to receiving. The one act presupposes the other act. Together, the two acts are one act, and yet each remains a separate act, at the same time. Literally, to write and read, we must give and receive.

Listening, speaking, reading, and writing, the four modes of language, are inextricably related (Thaiss, 1984). In particular, listening/speaking and reading/writing are interdependent pairs, the latter being a clever human extension of the former. If ability in half of a communications pair languishes, so does ability in the other half. To comprehend our perceptions and communicate forcefully, then, we would do well to speak in response to what we hear, and write in response to what we read.

Unfortunately, in the usual instructional approaches to reading, writing plays little or no role. Mostly, reading is taught as a sequence of discrete skills to be mastered one-at-a-time by students. For example, in the phonics approach, isolated letter sounds or letter clusters are studied sequentially and blended to form words. In the linguistic approach, patterns of letters are studied and combined to form words (Carbo, 1987). Usually, the analytic reading style necessary to approaches such as phonics and linguistics is taught as the definitive reading style. Yet, when taught discrete skills out of a meaningful context in this way, many students eventually get into the habit of reading only for "information retrieval"; consequently, they miss many of the ideas implied in a text (Kirby et al, 1986).

All in all, this kind of instructional approach to reading is simply ineffective, for it accommodates the analytic reading style more or less to the exclusion of global, kinesthetic, and auditory styles (Carbo, 1987). Notably, for global—visually oriented, whole-to-part reading styles—and for kinesthetic—touch-oriented, experiential reading styles, one of the recommended activities is writing in response to reading. Furthermore, for "poor readers," those who are uncomfortable with the analytic styles, one of the recommended activities is also writing in response to reading (Carbo, 1987).

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Reading/Writing Activities

If writing is half of a reading/writing equation, then reading taught together with writing would logically accommodate all reading styles. First of all, by writing while reading, students could learn to organize their thoughts (Wells, 1993). Second of all, after habitually writing in response to reading, they could learn to clarify and refine their thoughts (Brookes, 1988). By using a reading/writing approach, a teacher could supply students with the directives that would lead them to become adept readers.

To induce students to organize their thoughts, the teacher could arrange writing activities before and during reading. The activity could be as simple as a specific notetaking task. For example, while reading, the students could derive word meanings from context, or deduce logical relations among ideas, or infer probable conclusions based upon textual cues (Wong-Kam & Au, 1988). Or the activity could be as elaborate as a "directed reading/writing activity," for which students work through a series of writing activities: In a pre-reading activity, after being given a list of key vocabulary, or after reading the introduction to the text, for example, they cluster their pre-conceptions about the reading; then, they share these pre-conceptions with their classmates; last, they write out "goal questions," questions that they intend to answer by reading.

To induce students to elucidate their thoughts, the teacher could arrange transactional activities after initial reading. In these writing activities, students try to recognize their perceptions about a text, mold their interpretations, consider alternative interpretations, and make reinterpretations. For instance, the students could write about their ongoing reading experience in a "reading log." Through activities centered around a reading log, the students could elucidate several aspects of their thought processes: using the reading log as a "response journal," they could discover ideas, and using it as a "text-to-meaning journal," they could rethink ideas (Kirby et al, 1986). Using it as a "process journal," they could regulate their reading habits.

Students could use the reading log not only for different purposes for reading, but also for different types of reading. For example, a response journal could be used as a subject journal to write in response to nonfiction and as a literary journal to write in response to fiction (Cobine, 1995). In effect, the teacher could adapt the reading log to every reading assignment.

To induce students to discover ideas, the teacher could initiate response writing in the reading log. One way would be for the teacher to introduce an "agree-disagree question." For

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nonfiction, the teacher could ask a question about a controversial issue; for fiction, the teacher could ask about a provocative character or theme. In both cases, the more provocative the question, the better, for it brings out a more powerful response in writing (Brookes, 1988). Additionally, to initiate response writing, the teacher could introduce a "sentence starter," a potential main-idea statement or thesis statement (Kirby et al, 1986). For example, the students could be given incomplete sentences such as the following: "The overall message in the story is that. . ." or "The author's main point about the topic is that. . ."

To induce students to rethink ideas, the teacher could initiate revisory writing in the reading log. For instance, after response writing, the students could collaborate with a "reading partner" to revise their reading log entry. In turns, one partner reads aloud his or her entry and then takes notes in response to the other's probing questions; then, they revise their original entries (Brozo, 1988). Or the students could write a "post-discussion entry" as a follow-up to a pre-discussion entry (Cobine, 1995); then they could write a "formal response paper," along with a "revision postscript," explaining how much they changed their original response and why. Or, to initiate revisory writing, the teacher could assign a "double entry" in the reading log: After receiving a photocopy of a significant excerpt from a text, the students glue the excerpt into column-1 of a reading-log page and write down in column-2 the ideas that, they think, the text implies. In the same way, the teacher could assign an important question from the text for column-1, to be interpreted in writing in column-2. Or, to initiate revisory writing, the teacher could use the directed reading/writing post-reading activity: The teacher presents main-idea statements from a text as "main-idea questions"; then, the students compare their goal questions from the pre-reading activity with main-idea questions in order to rethink their initial assessment of the text.

To induce students to regulate their reading habits, the teacher could initiate self-monitoring writing in the reading log. Before a reading assignment, the teacher could raise "process questions" to be answered throughout reading, in conjunction with any of the previously suggested reading activities. In answering the questions, the students would become aware of their reading habits: how long they read at a time, how fast they read, under what conditions they read best, how they react to unknown words or concepts, etc. (Kirby et al, 1986).

Reading/Writing Assignments

Before students make entries in their reading logs, the teacher must ensure that they know how to use the log. Before every assignment, the teacher could discuss the type of reading and the purpose for reading, as well as the procedures for the particular assignment. Most importantly, the teacher could write and distribute a sample entry that illustrates careful questioning of and personal involvement with a reading assignment. Likewise, before students work with partners or in small groups, the teacher should ensure that they know their responsibilities so that they ask specific questions and make specific suggestions about one another's responses. The teacher could review the process with each assignment and emphasize the purpose of collaboration and discussion: to clarify and refine one's ideas about a reading.

Finally, to evaluate the students' use of the reading log, the teacher should consider the thoroughness and thoughtfulness of the entries. In evaluating a particular assignment, the teacher could write in the margins "probes," content-oriented questions that demand specific answers. After probing for thoroughness and thoughtfulness in this way, the teacher could evaluate the entries holistically on a 4-point scale, rewarding students with points, instead of a letter grade, for the reading log. So as not to stifle a student's attempt to respond to a reading (Nelson, 1990), the teacher could reserve a letter grade for a formal paper, which, as mentioned, would sometimes be a revision of an entry or series of entries.

All the activities arranged before, during, and after a reading and all the specific writing assignments made along with the reading are based upon the premise that students assimilate their perceptions of a text most fully by writing in response to reading. Through activities such as notetaking, goal-setting, and various types of response writing, students clarify their thoughts. Upon completing a reading/writing assignment, they have something to show for their work—something to "give"; namely, they have a written record of their responses to a reading. And so, in a humble way, they are blessed, for as we all know, it is far better to give than to receive.

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This publication was prepared with partial funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RR93002011. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necssarily represent the official view of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.